DISCLOSE INTIMATELY, HONESTY, HEAVILY, POSITIVELY AND INTENTIONALLY: AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-DISCLOSURE IN SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Self-disclosure is an important facet of social networking site (SNS) usage. To use the service, SNS users share a variety of personal information. However, to date, only a few studies examined individuals’ self-disclosure on SNS. Among these studies, they are predominantly concerned with the amount of self-disclosure. While prior research pointed out self-disclosure is a multi-dimensional construct comprised of intimacy, honesty, amount, valence and intentionality, it is important and imperative to take a holistic view of self-disclosure in the context of SNSs. Drawing upon the relationship perspective of IT adoption, this study intends to fill the theoretical gap. Specifically, we proposed that the multi-dimensional self-disclosure is determined by three antecedents: SNS user commitment, trust and use gratifications; while commitment is influenced by alternative quality, investment size and use gratifications, trust is a function of communication quality, opportunistic behaviors and use gratifications.

Keywords: Self-Disclosure, intimacy, honesty, amount, valence, intentionality, the relationship perspective of IT adoption, gratification
Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) are web-based services “that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). Since the inception in 2003, SNSs have been growing exponentially. Popular SNSs include Facebook, Bebo, LinkedIn, Twitter and Google Plus. Being an indispensable component of individuals’ lives, SNSs also enjoy significant business value. While Renren, LinkedIn and Facebook have been listed in the stock market, social networking features can be integrated into incumbent applications (e.g., e-commerce, VOIP services) of other Dot-com companies to improve user experiences. Furthermore, SNSs can be developed by traditional organizations to optimize internal operations and to enhance communications with external customers and business partners. Despite the differences in how their business value is appropriated, SNSs cannot succeed without having customers and employees adopt and continue to use them. Therefore, it is both important and imperative to understand the phenomenon of SNS usage.

IT usage is a complex multi-faceted phenomenon; as a result, previous researchers have put out a call for the Information System (IS) discipline to shift its attention to examine “deep usage” of IT (Chin & Marcolin, 2001, p. 9). In the context of SNSs, while many insights have been gained with regard to the general use of SNSs (i.e., why people initially adopt and continue to use SNSs), only a few studies examined individuals’ self-disclosure on websites, an importance facet of SNS usage. Enjoying the service, SNS users may share a variety of personal information. Such disclosure can take the form of either textual (e.g., status and profile) or non-textual information (e.g., personal pictures and videos). A review of the limited number of SNS self-disclosure research uncovers an issue that they are predominantly concerned with the amount of self-disclosure. This narrow focus might be problematic as Wheeless and Grotz (1976) pointed out that self-disclosure is a multi-dimensional construct comprised of several elements such as intimacy, honesty, amount, valence, and intentionality. Each captures an important facet of self-disclosure that has the potential to contribute SNS success. Thus, it is important to provide a holistic view of SNS self-disclosure. The research question of this paper is: What are the factors that influence the five dimensions of self-disclosure in the context of SNSs? To fill the theoretical gap, this paper draws upon the relationship perspective of IT to explain SNS self-disclosure.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first present the importance of self-disclosure to the success of SNSs with focus on the role of each disclosure dimension. We then introduce the relationship perspective of IT, as well as its validity in explaining self-disclosure in the context of SNSs. Next, we propose a research model with hypotheses and justify the relationship between constructs. We next depict the methodology by which we will collect data and test research model in the future. We end with a summary of the expected contribution of this research-in-progress.

Self-Disclosure in SNSs

Information disclosure or self-disclosure is not alien to IS research (Posey et al., 2010, Zimmer et al., 2010). The importance of self-disclosure continues in the SNS context. The user-generated content nature of SNSs dictates that the success and long-term sustainability of SNSs depend heavily on the extent to which users disclose personal information on the websites (Chen, 2013). Therefore, motivating self-disclosure among users becomes a critical issue for both SNS practitioners and researchers. According to Chen (2013), the importance of self-disclosure is four-fold. First, the disclosure of personal information lays the foundation for social interaction and relationship development among SNS users. Second, it enables the websites to provide personalized services for users based on individual information revealed. Third, advertising is a major revenue source for social networking vendors such as Facebook and Twitter. These websites may reply on the member information to offer customized ads, enabling targeted marketing. Fourth, individuals who engage in self-disclosure create personal and attractive content such as photos, videos and blogs, materials that contribute to the wealth of SNS communities and subsequently attract new members.

However, among the few SNS studies that address the topic, self-disclosure has been treated as a unidimensional construct that primarily focuses on the *amount* dimension. Other dimensions of self-disclosure are less attended. Such approach is problematic because each dimension contributes to the
value of the general self-disclosure, particularly in the SNS context. It is well-regarded that intimacy of disclosure is conducive to the development of deep interpersonal relationship (Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008). On the other hand, Kim et al. (2009) pointed out for SNSs, sound social interaction and relationship exchange among community members are critical to their success. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that without disclosing intimate content, the relationship between a SNS user and other community members will stay at a shallow level, which may negatively influence the booming of the website. As to the role of honesty, previous IS research has pointed out that what really matters to online business is to induce Internet users to divulge correct personal information (corresponding to the honesty dimension) because inaccurate personal information may jeopardize targeted marketing efforts (Son & Kim, 2008). On the other hand, like intimacy, honesty in self-disclosure enables the formation and development of deep relationships among SNS users (Derlega, et al., 2008).

Intent is another critical dimension of self-disclosure, which reflects the extent to which a person is aware of his or her disclosure. Given the substantial value of personal information, SNSs may use a variety of means to collect user information and analyze their behaviors, some of which are not noticed by users. According to Son and Kim (2008), many Internet users are not fully aware of such involuntary disclosure of their personal information until they receive targeted marketing message from other companies. As a result, they may refuse to provide information in the future. Valence is another important dimension of self-disclosure. We believe that the value of valence lies at when people disclosure negative information in SNSs, it will be seen by other users; further, it may negatively affect these people’s emotions. Prior IS research has found that emotions play a pivotal role in affecting system use (Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2010). Thus, we believe it is important to encourage positive self-disclosure because negative information will drive other SNS users away, threatening the sustainability of the SNS.

Having introduced the value of self-disclosure in SNS, as well as the role of each dimension, we believe it is important to understand the factors that determine self-disclosure. To accomplish this goal, we turn to the relationship perspective of IT and postulate that it is a valid theoretical lens to examine self-disclosure behaviors. Hence, the next section presents the theoretical foundation of the relationship perspective of IT.

Theoretical Foundation

The Relationship Perspective

A SNS bears dual roles of an IT product and a business entity. As a result, two types of relationships emerge when a person interacts with a SNS. First, corresponding to SNSs as an IT artifact is the interpersonal relationship. The validity of using interpersonal relationship comes from the fact that people treat websites and other IT applications as social actors full of human traits. The investment model has been proposed as a robust theory to explain the persistence of an interpersonal relationship. Second, corresponding to SNS as a business entity is the classic business-to-user relationship. Originating in marketing, the commitment-trust theory has been developed to address the notion of relationship marketing which entails the business-to-user relationship. We detail the forgoing two theories in the next two subsections.

The Investment Model

According to the investment model, one person is locked into a relationship because s/he is committed to the other party (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Here, commitment is defined as the extent to which one is willing to persist in a relationship. In addition, commitment is shaped by three factors, namely investment size, quality of alternatives and satisfaction. Here, investment size refers to the magnitude and importance of the resources invested on building and managing a current relationship. Quality of alternatives reflects how individuals’ needs could be effectively accommodated by options outside of the incumbent relationship. Recognizing the effect of satisfaction, the investment model was mainly proposed to address one paradox—why unsatisfied relationship lasts? Thus, the investment model suggests that an unsatisfied relationship continues because one may spend too much effort and momentary resources in managing the relationship and the quality of alternatives who may replace the incumbent party (or parties) at the other end of the relationship is inferior.
The investment model is an appropriate theory to examine user-website relationship in that numerous IS research (e.g., Al-Natour & Benbasat, 2009) has demonstrated that people interact with IT applications as they do with their human counterparts. Therefore, IT users can display relationship demonstration when they interact with the focal IT product, for example SNSs. With this assumption, certain IS research has drawn upon the investment model to examine Internet users’ relationship exchanges with websites (Toufaily, Ricard, & Perrien). Presumably, the theory is appropriate in explaining why SNS users involve in developing their relationships with the websites, which in turn contributes to their self-disclosure.

**The Commitment-Trust Theory**

The commitment-trust theory (CTT) is advocated by the relationship marketing literature that gives attention to the ongoing process of relationship exchange between a firm and various other parties (e.g., employees, customers, governments and business partners) in the context of businesses (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Based on the types of the parties a firm is engaging with, there are four major categories of relationship exchange: (1) **internal partnerships** occur within the focal firm among internal business units, functional departments and employees; (2) **buyer partnerships** involve relationship exchange between the focal firm and its customers; (3) **lateral partnerships** are related to any relationship exchange between the focal firm and its competitors, external nonprofit organizations and government; (4) **supplier partnerships** refer to the relationship exchange between the focal firm and suppliers. According to the theory, a firm should endeavor to cultivate its relationships with different parties; as a result, relationship marketing successes can achieve, including increased acquiescence, strengthened cooperation, and reduced propensity to leave, functional conflict and uncertainty. According to CTT, **commitment** and **trust** are the core factors in accomplishing the desired goals of relationship marketing efforts. For example, when customers are more committed to and more likely to trust a firm, they are more loyal to the firm, representing relationship marketing success in buyer partnership.

Regardless of the forms and levels of inter-relationships (e.g., business vs. interpersonal, organizational vs. individual), CTT overlaps with the investment model in the following areas. First, both theories agree that obtained relationship benefits contribute to commitment to the relationship. Second, both propose that relationship benefits are not enough to predict commitment. For example, the investment model indicates that commitment is also affected by investment size. CTT further posits that parallel to commitment, trust is another core factor in relationship marketing. Here, trust is a function of **shared value** representing common beliefs among two parties, **communication quality** reflecting the extent to which one party shares meaningful and timely information with others, and **opportunistic behavior** characterized by the extent to which one party takes advantages of the other.

**The Relationship Perspective in IS**

With the investment model and CTT as its foundation, the relationship perspective has been extensively applied to examine a variety of human-computer interaction in the IS field as a supplement to conventional IT adoption models (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Morris et al., 2005). Among those works, Li et al.’ (2006) research is most relevant to the purpose of our research-in-progress. To examine why users stick with an e-commerce website, Li et al. took a holistic view of the relationship perspective by integrating the investment model into CTT, which captures the virtues of the two theories. According to their work, **trust** and **commitment** are core factors in predicting users’ relationship with a website. Moreover, **commitment** is an additive function of: (1) **quality of alternatives** that serve similar functions as the focal website, (2) **investment size** that are temporal, monetary and cognitive spending put to accommodate use and (3) **relationship benefits** delivered by the website to online shoppers. On the other hand, to establish trust on the website, users access: (1) **communication quality**, referring to the extent to which the website timely shares meaningful information with online shoppers, (2) potential **opportunistic behavior** by the website that violates online shoppers’ expectations to pursue personal gains and (3) **relationship benefits**. Li et al.’ (2006) adopted user satisfaction to capture relationship benefits.

As an extension of Li et al.’s work, Xu et al. (2012) called a need to incorporate the uses and gratifications theory into the relationship perspective of IT. Specifically, they argued that gratification is a more appropriate proxy to estimate relationship benefits than satisfaction in the IT context where gratifications reflect individuals’ social/psychological needs accommodated by using a particular IT product. This is because in the IT domain, multiple forms of satisfaction exist. As a result, satisfaction is less able to
capture website performance (Smith, Johnston, & Howard, 2011). Hence, SNS users may be satisfied with
the functions of the website and the process of using the website, which enable them to establish and
maintain their relationships with the friends, or they may be satisfied with the friends in the website
because of the sound interaction with them.

Different from Smith et al. (2011) who used perceived usefulness to capture website performance, other IS
researchers (Guo, Tan, & Cheung, 2010; Xu, Ryan, Prybutok, & Wen, 2012) suggested gratification better
indicates the benefits of using IT because perceived usefulness fails to answer what makes IT useful
(Benbasat & Barki, 2007). Hence, different from Li et al.’s theoretical framework, the present paper
adopts gratification to estimate the benefits obtained from users’ ongoing relationship with a SNS. In
addition, this paper takes a step further to conceptualize gratifications as a second-order construct that
comprised of immediate access, coordination, affection and leisure, four primary gratifications associated
with SNS usage identified by prior studies (Xu et al., 2012). A summary of the research model in this
paper is displayed in Figure 1.

**Gratifications as Second-Order Construct**

We conceptualize gratifications as second-order construct for two reasons. First, according to Figure 1, the
relationships between each dimension of gratifications (i.e., immediate access, coordination, affection and
leisure) and other constructs are proposed to be the same. Therefore, it is reasonable to develop
hypotheses at the higher-order factor level rather than at the individual subconstruct level (Jarvis,
Mackenzie, Podsakoff, Mick, & Bearden, 2003). This approach produces parsimonious model that
provides abstractions that shed lights on explaining complex phenomenon (Petter, Straub, & Rai, 2007).
Second, the focus of this paper is on the five dimensions of self-disclosure. We are interested in the
validity of gratifications in predicting each dimension of self-disclosure to see if the effect of gratifications
holds for each self-disclosure dimension. Therefore, the second-order approach that treats gratifications
as a whole fits the purpose. If we look into the effect of each gratification dimension, we then fall into the
atomistic fallacy where we would mistakenly draw inferences at higher levels based on analysis of
decomposed models (Petter, et al., 2007).

**The Application of the Relationship Perspective to Self-Disclosure**

We believe the relationship perspective of IT adoption fit the context of this paper is that it has CTT as the
theoretical foundation. SNSs’ content is generated by users who assume a similar role of goods suppliers
for traditional organizations. Therefore, the user-SNS relationship can also be classified into supplier
partnerships. Furthermore, previous self-disclosure literature has pointed out that one’s self-disclosure to
other party increases as their relationship develops. This is because self-disclosure is risky. To reduce
uncertainty, people are more inclined to disclose to those who are trusted and liked (Derlega, et al.,
2008). Presumably, when SNS users are more committed to and more likely to trust the websites, they are
more likely to share personal information on the sites.

**Hypothesis Development**

**Gratifications and Self-Disclosure**

Previous self-disclosure studies have pointed out that the self-disclosure behavior is driven by the pursuit
of certain benefits, and such relationship is well-supported by the social-presentation theory (Collins &
Miller, 1994). A discloser anticipates benefits of allowing others to know more about him or herself. Thus,
self-disclosure are perceived as instrumental to expected outcomes (Taylor, 1979). With the rise of new
media technologies, the effect of benefits on soliciting self-disclosure remains valid in the computer-
mediated communication environment. For example, Qian and Scott (2007) argued that individuals use
blogs to engage in self-disclosure because the new technology provides such gratifications such as
providing better understanding of self, confirming one’s beliefs, offering rewards in social interactions,
and manipulating others’ opinions. In Li’s (2012) meta-analysis of online privacy disclosure, he
summarized that privacy disclosure involves a cost-benefit analysis and individuals decide whether or not
to disclosure information based on the net outcomes. Given the findings of Xu’s et al. (2012) work that
immediate access, coordination, leisure and affection are the four gratifications that drive SNS usage and
such gratifications reflect the benefits associated with using SNSs, we hypothesize that:
H1: Gratifications will positively influence the amount, depth, intent, honesty and valence of self-disclosure.

**Commitment and Self-Disclosure**

Commitment is a “force that binds an individual to a course of action” (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001, p. 301). The influence of commitment on self-disclosure is attributable to two factors: intention to further an ongoing relationship and intention to avoid risks. First, one is committed to a relationship in an expectation that the relationship will continue in the future (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Self-disclosure is an effective means to further interpersonal relationship (Derlega, et al., 2008). Thus, it can be expected that commited individuals are more likely to disclose themselves in order to advance an ongoing relationships. Derlega et al. (2008) also suggested that disclosing oneself involvs risks due to uncertainties; thus, self-disclosure is a highly selective and it occurs when one has good relationship with the disclosed party. Since commitment is highly indicative of a sound relationship, presumably, commitment has a positive effect on self-disclosure. As noted earlier, SNS users treat the websites as human beings. Thus, when one is committed to his or her relationship with a SNS, that person may disclose to a larger extent. Taking together, we hypothesize that:

H2: Commitment with a SNS will positively influence the amount, depth, intent, honesty and valence of self-disclosure.

**Figure 1. Research Model**

Trust, Commitment and Self-Disclosure

Trust is one of the most-studied constructs in the IS research. The present paper defines trust as the extent to which an individual believes that the SNS is trustworthy and is confident about the site's future behavior. Numerous studies have found that trust has a positive effect on different dimensions of self-disclosure (e.g., L. R. Wheeless & Grotz, 1977). Such effect holds in the Internet settings when one disclosures private information on a website (Malhotra, Sung, & Agarwal, 2004). Specifically, Malhotra et al. (2004) explicated that the relationship between trust and intention to disclose is grounded in the theory of reasoned action; while trust beliefs have been found to affect such behavioral intentions as willingness to buy, it seems natural for increased trust to lead to higher intention to reveal personal
information. Although how trust affects different dimensions of self-disclosure is sparsely explored, supported by self-disclosure literature in the offline environment, we hypothesize that:

H3: Trust with a SNS will positively influence the amount, depth, intent, honesty and valence of self-disclosure.

According to the relationship marketing literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), trust is the cornerstone of relationship exchange, and it is a major determinant of relationship commitment. The causal relationship between trust and commitment in the Internet context has received numerous empirical supports (Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2006; Wu, Chen, & Chung, 2010). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H4: Trust with a SNS will positively influence commitment.

**Alternative Quality**

This paper defines alternative quality as the extent to which an alternative website is able to fulfill an individual's needs as the focal SNS does. The investment model posits that the presence of an attractive alternative could threaten one's commitment in an existing interpersonal relationship (Rusbult, et al., 1998). Such relationship was also supported in the IT context (e.g., D. Li, et al., 2006; Xu, Ryan, Magro, et al., 2012). Thus:

H5: Alternative quality will positively influence commitment.

**Investment Size**

This paper defines investment size as the temporal and cognitive resources that one put to accommodate the use of a SNS. The greater the investment size, the higher the possibility that an individual is locked into the relationship. This relationship between investment size and commitment is well-demonstrated in previous IS research (e.g., D. Li, et al., 2006; Xu, Ryan, Magro, et al., 2012). Thus:

H6: Investment size will positively influence commitment.

**Communication Quality**

This paper defines communication quality as the extent to which a SNS timely shares meaningful information with its users via various channels. Communication quality has been shown to be a major antecedent of trust in both online and offline environments (Anderson & Narus, 1990; D. Li, et al., 2006; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H7: Communication quality will positively influence trust.

**Opportunistic Behavior**

The present paper defines opportunistic behavior as the extent to which SNS practitioners take advantage of users for personal gains. A trustor's assessment of the likelihood of a trustee performing opportunistic behaviors is an important antecedent of his or her trust formation (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003; D. Li, et al., 2006). Extending such influence to the SNS context, we hypothesize that:

H8: Opportunistic behavior will negatively influence trust.

**Gratifications, Trust and Commitment**

CTT (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) asserts that commitment to a relationship arises when one party accommodates the other’s needs and delivers superior benefits than alternatives. Based on the uses and gratifications theory, Xu et al. (2012) indicated that the gratifications one derives from SNS usage reflects the superior benefits the site enables. Thus, it follows that gratifications are the determinants of trust as perceived benefits are. While Cheung and Lee (2009) found that gratifications obtained from using a virtual community influence one’s commitment to the community, we hypothesize that:

H9: Gratifications positively influence commitment.

Online trust is formed when website users feel positive about the focal site (Everard & Galletta, 2006). Therefore, when a SNS gratifies users' needs, they tend to believe that the focal site enjoys the positive attributes, which in turn contributes to trust. On the other hand, it was found that the abilities of a website to do what users need and how well it does the job, regarded as website credibility, promotes users’ trust on the focal website (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002). Given that the concept of
gratifications is consistent with the notion of website credibility in that they both give users more confidence and reduce uncertainties about the performance of websites, we hypothesize that:

H10: Gratifications positively influence commitment.

Methodology

We will develop all the measurements based on their theoretical underpinning and previous relevant literature. The four gratification dimensions will be measured by questions from Xu et al.’s (2012) study on the SNS usage. The measurements for investment size, alternative quality, commitment, trust, opportunistic behavior, communication quality have the roots in Morgan and Hunt’s (1994) commitment-trust theory, and they have been applied by Li et al. (D. Li, et al., 2006) to examine individuals’ intentions to stick with an e-commerce website. We will develop the scales for the foregoing constructs based on these two seminal works. Last but not least, the five dimensions of self-disclosure will be measured with the items borrowed from Leung’s (2002) work which adapted self-disclosure to the Internet context. We will evaluate all the questions by a 5-point scale anchored at 1 representing strongly disagree, 3 representing neutral and 5 representing strongly agree.

College students will be chosen as subjects for this study. Reasons are two-fold. First, previous SNS study has pointed out people aged 18-34 are the most avid users of social media; hence college students are representative SNS users. The findings of this paper will be appropriate to inform practitioners. Second, it will help us largely eliminate the confounding effect of LinkedIn. Organization employees heavily use LinkedIn where it seems natural for them to disclose personal information like education background and job history so that they can be contacted for better job opportunities. Our surveys will be administered in a major public state university in the southwestern U.S. where the authors are from. Participation in this research will be voluntary with extra credits given as an incentive. The survey data will be analyzed with PLS to test the hypotheses.

Conclusion

In sum, the present paper applies the relationship perspective of IT to propose a theoretical framework that explains the five dimensions of self-disclosure. To our best knowledge, little to no research has taken a holistic view to examine self-disclosure. This study has the potential to further the intellectual understanding of self-disclosure and to provide guidance for practitioners to better manage their social media platforms. Moreover, although previous self-disclosure literature (Derlega, et al., 2008) posited that the extent to which one discloses evolves with the development of the relationship, our understanding of how relationship affects different dimensions of self-disclosure is limited. Empirically testing the proposed model here provides opportunities to know how different dimensions of self-disclosure are associated with relationship (with a SNS website). If the explained variance of a self-disclosure dimension is low, it suggests that a new theoretical framework is needed to gain more insights into the dimension. In this sense, this study also has the potential to contribute to the self-disclosure research by uncovering new research opportunities. A major limitation of the paper is that two types of relationships may exist while one uses SNSs. Thus, in addition to empirically testing the research model, future research may take into consideration how a SNS user’s relationship with other members influences his/her disclosure behaviors.

1 Due to page limit, the measuring items are available upon request.
References


